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ABSTRACT

Because a requirement for students in many public relations (PR) courses is that they must pool their efforts with other students, problems may arise when good students must work with students less motivated or organized than they. One answer to this problem may be to steer the brightest PR students toward a course that integrates communication theory and practice in an instructional simulation, also known as experience-based learning. Such a course gives a student an understanding of roles and behaviors encountered in organizational settings. In higher education, experience-based learning takes many forms, among which those used most often are role play, exercises, games, and simulations. One elaborate organization simulation, created by Lederman and Stewart, is the Simcorp Simulation--a semester-long simulation of a corporate-like organization that finds and supplies one client per semester. Although there are problematic assumptions that generally underlie instructional simulations, including the belief that all people learn from experience, the Simcorp Simulation attempts to deal with these constructively. The simulations developed for use in organizational communication courses blend theory-based learning with experienced practice. They can help PR students understand the group and organizational dynamics that are likely to be encountered in the workplace. (DF)

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PR Division

INSTRUCTIONAL SIMULATION HELPS PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND ROLES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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(INSTRUCTIONAL SIMULATION HELPS PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS
TO UNDERSTAND ROLES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION)

Many departments of journalism or mass communication with a public relations sequence that includes a campaigns course attempt to give their students a feeling of "real-world" experience by requiring them to form agencies or task groups for the purpose of completing work for clients. Most students like the challenge of preparing news releases, feature stories, brochures, advertisements, and public service announcements for such clients, and they learn to appreciate the complexity of pleasing both the client and the course instructor.

More problematic for many public relations students is the requirement that they must pool their efforts with other students, some of whom are less motivated, less prepared, or have less time to develop campaign materials outside of class. "Group work" can become a sore point for many PR students, although most of them appreciate that "group work" is the nature of most public relations enterprises. Indeed, for the student who contemplates joining the PR department of a corporation or other large organization, an understanding of group dynamics is essential.

For the communication department that also offers instruction in organizational communication, the answer to this problem may be to steer the brightest PR prospects toward a course that integrates communication theory and practice in an instructional simulation (also known as experience-based learning). Such a course gives the student an understanding of roles and behaviors encountered in organizational settings. We shall review the literature of instructional simulation

in organizational communication, describe a successful simulation, and indicate ways that theory and practice can be blended in teaching both internal and external communication.

WHAT IS EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING?

Experience-based learning takes many forms. Role play, exercises, games and simulations are among the most often used in higher education.

Instructional simulations, designed as operating models of reality or some aspect of reality, are one form of experience-based learning. They have had periodic popularity in many academic disciplines, including communication (Lederman and Ruben, 1978). They have been hailed by those who have embraced them as a vehicle for learning that is captivating for students; they have been criticized by those who have refused to use them as simply not sound educationally (Lederman, 1983).

While some disciplines (Parasuraman, 1982), including communication (Ruben and Lederman, 1982), have only recently recognized the need for systematic assessment of simulations, an interdisciplinary literature on assessment of the educational effectiveness of simulations has begun to emerge over the last decade. Originally assessments of the educational effectiveness of simulations were based primarily on often well-documented anecdotal evidence. By the mid-1970s, however, more systematic scientific evidence was being amassed as the basis for systematic evaluation and assessment of the educational effectiveness of simulations. Pierfy (1977), reviewed more than twenty studies in which the research question compared

learning outcomes in simulations with those of traditional methods for cognitive learning.

In 1982, Bredemeier and Greenblat provided a comprehensive review of the assessment literature on simulations, concluding that the available evidence suggested that simulations were at the very least as effective as other methods in facilitating subject matter learning. Comparative studies of behavioral and affective learning outcomes also appear in the assessment literature (Coughlin, 1980). Simulations are consistently found to be more effective than traditional methods for creating positive affects about learning, and Lederman (1983), in a study designed to explore the possible relationship between designated roles of participants in an organizational simulation and the resulting learning outcomes, found relationships between designated role in the simulation and perceptions of learning outcome.

As a methodology, instructional simulation can be incorporated into organizational communication education. Simulations have been used as vehicles for the application of organizational communication theory, providing a needed complement to more familiar approaches to organizational communication instruction.

Goodall (1982, p.284) points out that "the traditional approach to organizational communication is based on a potentially dangerous assumption -- (that the students have) a preexisting store of practical organizational experience."

In providing student learning through organizational simulations participants come to recognize that human communication is an extremely complex and encompassing social process that occurs at various levels in organization life. They begin to build a knowledge base about individual information processing and role-development, relationship

development, group decision-making, information flow in organizational networks, and the exchange of information between organizations and their relevant environments.

Organizational simulations are operating models of reality (Lederman, 1983; Lederman and Ruben, 1984; Duke and Greenblat, 1975). As such they are capable of providing practical experience and of producing events that have learning value concerning the dynamics of an organization over time. Information about key theories of organization (e.g. classical theory, human relations theory, systems theory, Weick's theory of organizing, organizational culture theory) helps to prepare participants to interpret the complexities of organizational experiences (Kreps, 1985). Providing simulation participants with broad understanding of organizational communication helps to prepare them to handle the many different communication demands of organizational life and learn from their simulation experiences. This dynamic, over-time quality is an important defining characteristic of simulations of organizations (Jandt, 1974, p.79).

THE 'SIMCORP' SIMULATION

One elaborate organization simulation, created by Lederman and Stewart (1983) is the SIMCORP SIMULATION. Briefly, SIMCORP is a semester-long simulation of a corporate-like organization which finds and supplies one client per semester.[2] A product or service is negotiated between the client and the organization. SIMCORP's objective is to meet the client's needs by successfully producing a product or service desired by the client and distributing and/or marketing it in accordance with guidelines provided by the client and agreed to by the organization.

In order to be a functioning organization that can meet the objectives of identifying and contracting with clients to produce products and/or services for them, SIMCORP's structure is divided into three divisions:

(1) Internal Operations (those departments whose primary responsibilities are to keep the organization running smoothly;

(2) Finance (those departments whose primary responsibilities are to keep the organizational records and to identify and pursue capital ventures; and

(3) Production (those departments whose primary responsibilities are to identify clients and to develop, produce and market the contracted product and/or service.

The organizaton is headed by a President who directly supervises an Executive Vice President of Internal Operations and an Executive Vice President of Production, each of whom is responsible for the activities of Vice Presidents of each of the three divisions. Within each major division, departments and divisions, with managers and/or directors, carry out specific tasks central to the overall function of the divisions and the organization itself.

As the organization has matured, it has committed itself to creating a productive environment in which workers can experience a high degree of job-related satisfaction. To this end, SIMCORP has entered into a long-term contract with a firm of External Consultants who work directly with the President and with the members of the Organizational Development Department. The External Consultants are hired for the purpose of identifying and working with any communication problems which interfere with effective organizational functioning.

At the beginning of each new semester, SIMCORP opens its doors to new employees (students) who apply for positions in the organization and are hired to continue the business in which the organization is already engaging. At the end of the semester, members of the organization who wish to continue to work for SIMCORP may apply to be external consultants and to work in the next iteration of the simulation. While working in the simulation, students are cast in roles as organizational members with specified titles, job descriptions, and work objectives.

Participants are provided with specified tasks to perform and/or with responsibility for designing and/or implementing those tasks. They are evaluated individually, on a departmental level and on an organization level. The simulation ends after an entire semester, and begins again at the outset of the next semester of SIMCORP.

PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING SIMULATIONS

Three problematic assumptions underly instructional simulations in general, and organizational simulations in particular:

* First, that all people learn from experience;
* Second, that debriefing is an ancillary part of the simulation process, and
* Third, that simulations are models of realities (Lederman, 1983).

The implementation of SIMCORP, and its use over time at Rutgers University, has allowed us as researchers to have a laboratory for learning about organizational simulations and to reexamine those assumptions.

EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING: LEARNING BY DOING

The first assumption upon which all simulations, as well as all other forms of experience-based learning, rest is that people learn from experience. It is assumed that, since people learn by doing, providing them with something to do provides them with an experience from which to learn. There are three problems with this assumption.

First, not all kinds of learning are potentially mastered by the experience of "doing". The literature on simulations itself is replete with studies examining the potential of simulations for providing learning. Pierfy (1974) and Bredemeir and Greenblat (1984) review the literature and indicate that simulations are in fact a valuable way for learning some sorts of things. They are particularly useful for learning affective and behavioral things. But while there are some cognitive kinds of learning for which they are effective, for many conceptual kinds of learning they are no more effective than traditional methods. In fact, they are less effective in some instances. (Bredemeir and Greenblat, 1981) It is therefore not quite accurate to claim that simulations provide learning. At best, it can be asserted that they can provide experiences from which some sorts of learning can be derived. (Lederman, 1983)

The second and related problem with the assumption that people learn by doing is that even though they may learn, what exactly it is that they learn is not always altogether clear.

Finally, it is not safe to assume that people learn equally effectively from simulations because of the variety of cognitive styles and learning styles. These variables determine how, if at all, a person can learn from an experiential activity. Just as there are

some students who can demonstrate their knowledge well on essay exams but not on objective tests, and vice versa, there are those students for whom the nontraditional structure of learning via a simulation is simply less effective. The person, for example, with high needs for direction, with low tolerance for ambiguity, with the capacity to follow instructions but not to initiate behavior, is simply not someone who can predictably learn from the experience of participating in a simulation.

Rather than assuming that simulations ensure learning, it is safer to argue that they stimulate some types of learning for some types of students. Like all instructional methodologies, they are subject to certain limitations. In the SIMCORP SIMULATIONS, for example, the learning objectives are behavioral and affective -- the application of theory rather than the learning of it from experience. All students who participate in the simulation are required to have completed basic communication courses and at least one course in organizational communication prior to entering the simulation. They participate in the simulation, then, to have the experience of putting previously mastered theory into practice, to have the experience of comparing what one thinks and what one actually does.

Stewart (1983) cites several potential learning outcomes for students of organizational communication in SIMCORP. Among these learning outcomes are:

1) the opportunity to try out different management styles;
2) first-hand experience dealing with conflicting goals;
3) understanding the concept that members of organizations are interdependent;

4) the opportunity to see the distortion that occurs when messages travel through an organization, and

5) an appreciation of the power of "labeling" -- the phenomenon of behaviors that occur when individuals have roles and titles conferred upon them.

Thus, learning in the simulated organization is based on one's own behavior. The manager of a department, for example, whose theory is humanistic but who docks workers salaries for tardiness, has to confront the implications for his/her own management style. He/she is not learning the concepts of management style; he/she is learning his/her own actual managerial behavior.

Furthermore, because experience with SIMCORP has indicated that some students' learning styles are such that they cannot benefit from the experience, the simulation has been modified to include a mechanism for removing someone from the organization and having him/her work independently, generally on an assignment designed to relate to the student's specific problems encountered in working in a simulated organization and the implications for the student's real-life work choices.

Thus, in the SIMCORP SIMULATION mechanisms are built in so that the kinds of learning desired in simulations are maximized and care is taken to minimize the assumption that all kinds of learning are possible as a consequence of experience.

DEBRIEFING (PROCESSING) AS ANCILLARY

The second assumption is that simulations are activities unto themselves, followed by debriefing sessions in which students are

encouraged to process their learnings. The assumption here is that the simulation is one thing; the debriefing is another, an appendage rather than a central component of the experience.

Debriefing, the post-experience analytic process, has a long tradition as part of experience-based activities. It is that part of the activity which actually distinguishes experience-based learning in the classroom from experience-based learning anywhere else. It is what distinguishes the classroom as a purposively structured and designed educational environment in which the individual is there to learn not on his or her own, but through the instructor's guidance in learning from that experience. Outside of the classroom, the human being learns what he or she is capable of learning by experience, by doing. But in the classroom the doing of the activity merely provides the data, the basis upon which the learning is to take place. The processing of those data and the drawing out of the implications and applications are a primary and central part of the activity.

To assume differently often results in shortening the debriefing function. Simulations are time-consuming. If one assumes that students learn by doing in and of itself, when time runs out what gets cut is the time for the debriefing. If one recognizes that the debriefing provides the real structured guidance and insures the learning process, then one realizes the importance of assuring enough time for that part of the process. This is often problematic, particularly with elaborate simulations which, in and of themselves, are time-consuming.

In the SIMCORP SIMULATION this assumption was confronted by incorporating two types of debriefing into the design of the simulations.

First, there is regular, periodic debriefing which takes place each time the class is in session. Before students go into their roles in the organization, they are led by the instructor through a debriefing session focusing on behaviors that have been taking place and the implications of them. As students become heavily involved in their roles, they may choose to limit the debriefing time as problems arise; however, they may choose to process rather than go on to continued participation. But each class session begins with at least some time to devote to debriefing.

Second, the designers incorporated Lippitt's Stop Action[3] technique into the simulation. At any time in which the simulation seems to need to be processed, a Stop Action takes place, and whatever time is necessary is used to debrief rather than continue the organizational activity.

SIMULATIONS AS MODELS OF REALITY

The third and final assumption upon which the design and implementation of simulations is often based is that simulations can be conceptualized as operating models of reality or some aspect of reality. This conceptualization is consistently found in the literature on simulations. Even those who argue for systematic assessment of the effectiveness of simulations (Lederman and Ruben, 1984) base that framework for assessment on the assumption that they are operating models of reality. The SIMCORP SIMULATION was designed upon this assumption. Attention was given to what Lederman and Ruben (1984) refer to as face and construct validity, or correspondence with real world counterparts and concepts in the design of SIMCORP. More

than five semesters of experience with this elaborate simulation, however, suggest that the simulation may in fact be more than a model of reality. It might also be depicted as an operating reality in and of itself, and this might hold true for all simulated, participatory activities.

The basis for this reconceptualization of simulations is reflection upon the differences between interactive, participatory simulations and other types of models. Unlike mathematic models of the marketplace or clay models of houses, interactive, participatory organizational simulations are comprised of the same materials (people, behaviors, structures) as their real world counterparts. And like their real world counterparts, once created and set into motion, they take on a life of their own. While this is more obvious in the case of an elaborate organizational simulation such as SIMCORP, the same holds true even for those simulations games in which participants engage in decision-making activities vis-a-vis one another and thereby are of the same substance as any decision-making activity which the simulated game is designed to model. In fact, were they not made of the same sorts of substance, there would be no justification for allowing students to "play" with marbles or colored pieces of paper or tinkertoys in the college classroom.

The problems with assuming that simulations are models rather than operating realities themselves is that one can therefore assume, too, that the behavior in them is simulated; that it happens, is learned from, and is put away, as is the board they create in the CHECKERBOARD GAME or the dice they throw in THEY SHOOT MARBLES. But the behaviors in which students engage are real behaviors just as they are real

people in real interactions with one another, albeit interactions designed and structured for them. Often these are one and the same as their behavior outside the classroom. To assume that the behaviors are less than real is to assume that they have no costs. It is, in fact, often argued that simulations are less costly than real world experience in terms of time and money and error: that failure in the simulation is less costly than losing one's job in a real world organizaton. But less costly is not the same as cost-free. Their are costs associated with behaviors. The managers, for example, in SIMCORP pay prices for their dealings with the other students whom they supervise, and these need be addressed just as their effectiveness is addressed.

By reconceptualizing simulations as operating realities, more value is placed on the actual operation as it unfolds and its implications. If you treat simulations as real experiences, students can be provided with some real insights into those experiences and the implications of them for the other realities in which they deal outside the classroom. The student, for example, who plays Prisoner's Dilemma aggressively is stuck with the consequence of that behavior as well as with the perceptions of that behavior by other students. When behavior is conceptualized as real rather than simulated, more time and attention can be focused on the implications of that behavior.

While it is therefore often the case that simulations are conceptualized as operating models of reality, it seems that it is not safe to make the assumption that they are simply models--that some benefits are derived from reconceptualizing them as operating realities unto themselves. This reconceptualization is the way in which the SIMCORP SIMULATION is viewed in its operation.

IMPLICATIONS OF ADDRESSING THE THREE ASSUMPTIONS

Simulations as an instructional methodology are a powerful learning tool. Implementation of them for learning about organizational communication requires some examination of the assumptions upon which the methodology rests. By addressing the assumptions that people learn from experience, that debriefing is secondary rather than part and parcel, and that simulations are models rather than realities, instructors selecting to use simulations are better prepared for the experience they provide students.

Re-examining these three assumptions is critical for the effective use of simulations in the organizational communication classroom. The role of the instructor who uses experience-based learning is a different role from that of the traditional classroom teacher. It is an instructional role nonetheless, and it is most effectively enacted when the instructor has taken into account the implications of the sorts of considerations addressed herein.

It is not assumed all things organizational can be learned in SIMCORP or any other single simulation. It is assumed instead that what the students knows about organizations can be brought to bear in his/her experience in participating in a simulated organization and that the experience can then be processed and learned from. It is not assumed that a simulation such as SIMCORP is a model. It is assumed that it is a reality unto itself and the responsibility of the instructors therefore is to keep a careful eye on that reality and the people participating with one another in it so as to provide them with the reflective guidance they may need. It is not assumed that debriefing is ancillary. It is seen as primary. To facilitate it in

the SIMCORP simulation, for example, the External Consultant role was invented and incorporated into the simulation; daily debriefing sessions are included in the calendar of events; Stop Actions occur whenever necessary.

OTHER APPLICATIONS OF SIMULATION

Clearly simulations such as SIMCORP can provide a rich learning experience for the students of organizational communication. The benefits of experience-based learning should not be limited, however, to students whose academic paths lead them to the course where the full-blown instructional simulation provides the entire structure for classroom activity. Simulation, often in more limited form, should be a staple in all of the organizatonal communication-related courses found in the college curriculum, including public relations, management, persuasion and even mass communication skills courses.

The change in methodology and focus begins with a change in nomenclature. A course titled "Writing for Public Relations" will tend to stay within the parameters of instructing students "how to" prepare news releases, press kits, brochures, radio spots, and other media messages meant to accomplish the external communication goals of an organization. In that approach, the instructor typically is seen as the "expert," whose criticism of incorrect style and format determines the student's grade in the course. At most, student discussion is invited in the form of criticizing the work of other students in view of the "correct models" offered by the instructor or the text.

If the course title is changed to "Message Design for Public Relations and Organizational Communication," and if the instructor borrows some of the style and techniques used by the instructors in courses using simulation, then more burden is put on the student to analyze each writing or design assignment in view of the context in which it occurs.

That context is provided by taking on a client for the semester -- an organization that needs messages designed for dissemination to external publics. The client can be the department offering the course, but the simulation is richer if the client is external to the department, and perhaps even to the academic institution. Then the instructor may be as unfamiliar with the client's objectives as are the students, and the instructor's role is to assure that the students seek all the information they need about the client and the client's environment before they begin to prepare messages for external publics.

As in organizational communication courses using simulations such as SIMCORP, students in the message design course organize in task groups, and it is useful if a student who has previously taken the course returns as an instructional assistant (for independent study credit) and acts as a liaison, supervisor, or consultant to the task groups. Unlike simulations such as SIMCORP, however, the focus is not on understanding the structure of the organization. Traditional classroom activities (lecture presentation, guest speakers, individual homework assignments) are carried on simultaneously. The experience-based simulation activities occupy perhaps one third to one half of each class meeting.

The instructor who uses these short simulation exercises must be able to switch from the authoritarian style of the lecturer who can impart information about standards and practices in the field, to a mentor who can use the Socratic method to get students thinking about the nature of the problems they must solve. It may be difficult, but the instructor must be willing to settle for message designs that are less than professional in quality, in exchange for the development of analytical and problem-solving abilities that the students develop when they must figure out what a client wants and fit those desires to the needs and behaviors of the media managers and the mass media audiences.

THE NEED FOR REPLICATION AND REDUNDANCY

Because the simulation experience is so rich, the student will benefit from revisiting it, in the same or other forms, in order to validate experience or to observe the varying outcomes that result from varying behavioral inputs. There is also the danger, if one participates in only one simulation, that the seminal experience becomes "the right way" or "the only way." Replication and redundancy help the individual to understand which attributes of organizations are fairly consistent, and which are susceptible to manipulation.

Replication and redundancy also can be achieved when students of organizational communication are encouraged and permitted to take other courses where experience-based learning techniques are part of the course structure. For example, organizational communication students can be encouraged to take public relations courses, and PR students can be exposed to organizational communication instruction.

This pairing of courses prevents a dysfunctional dichotomy -- the notion that organizational communication deals with only internal communication, and public relations deals only with external communication.

CONCLUSION

The simulations developed for use in organizational communication courses blend theory-based learning with experience-based practice. They can help public relations students to understand group and organizational dynamics they are likely to encounter in the workplace.

NOTES

1. From an anecdote in Waverly Root's The Food of Italy (New York: Atheneum, 1971) pp. 80-81.

2. SIMCORP traces its history to Brent D. Ruben's Interact (Kennybunkport, ME: Mercer House Press, 1973) and to Ruben, Talbott, Brown and LaBrie's Intermedia (Iowa city: IA: University Associates, 1970).

3. Ronald Lippitt uses this technique in the organizational workshops he conducts for the National Training Labs at Bethel, Maine, the birthplace of the study and application of group dynamics in this country.

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